

Rapid Brief #1: Best Practices for Assessments During the COVID-19 Pandemic

This series of rapid briefs is being developed by the [Wisconsin-Minnesota Comprehensive Center - Region 10](#) (WMCC10). The purpose of these briefs is to provide succinct and timely guidance on best practices for schools and school-based early learning programs regarding the assessment of student learning, with the goal of informing instructional planning and decision-making during the COVID-19 pandemic.

This brief synthesizes guidance from the [Minnesota Department of Education](#) (MDE) and existing guidance offered by professional educational associations, assessment/test vendors, state departments of education, and educational organizations (see [reference list](#)). This brief is intended for instructional and school/program leaders (including but not limited to principals, curriculum directors, instructional coaches, assessment coordinators, early learning coordinators, and special education administrators).

Note: The content of this brief is focused on general best practices regarding assessing student learning. If you are looking for information specific to administering and decision-making related to the MN Comprehensive Assessment (MCA), please refer to MDE's [Student Instruction Resource page](#) and [MCA and MTAS During COVID-19](#).

Purpose and Role of Assessments

Districts/schools/programs must understand why they are administering an assessment.

Academic and social emotional well-being assessments administered must have a clear purpose linked to actions that will benefit students and their families.

- To understand where students are in their learning progression.
- To guide instructional planning and decision making regarding student needs (e.g., identifying strengths, learning gaps, and opportunities; allocating resources).
- To partner with families about their child(ren)'s learning.
- To understand students' progress towards mastering academic and [early learning standards](#), including [social emotional learning](#).
- To inform continuous improvement of the instructional system (e.g., to identify areas for professional development, to examine effectiveness of core instruction).

Districts are encouraged to implement a [comprehensive assessment system](#), particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic. Districts can disaggregate student data to help ensure equitable student outcomes, instructional practices, and decision-making in promoting school success for all students.



Assessment Best Practices During COVID-19

Classroom Assessments

Classroom assessments provide ongoing (formative) and cumulative (summative) evaluations of instructional effectiveness and student understanding (e.g., [KEP-approved assessments](#), teacher-made tests, curriculum unit tests).

- Prioritize assessments that align most closely to classroom instruction to support teachers with instructional planning and to inform families of their child(ren)'s progress.
- Increase regular use of informal assessments (e.g., pre-tests, post-tests, polls, daily reviews, classroom assessments, teacher-made assessments) to assess student learning and inform instructional planning to target critical skills necessary for proficiency.
- Be efficient with teacher/practitioner time and maximize the use of existing data to assess student needs and progress. Avoid administering duplicative or redundant assessments.
- Provide professional development specific to creating and designing high quality classroom assessments.

Standardized Assessments

*Standardized assessments have consistent administration and scoring procedures and norms (e.g., Measures of Academic Progress, *FASTBridge*, *aimsweb*).*

- Prioritize administering universal screening assessments (e.g., MAP, *FASTBridge*) when students are in-person or in school.
- Continue administering assessments that were in place before the COVID-19 pandemic began and avoid introducing new assessments.
- Offer a flexible testing window to increase higher engagement and completion rates.
- When administering standardized assessments remotely (both for assessments students are expected to complete independently and those with proctor guidance throughout), consider the following guidelines:
 - Assessments administered remotely must be conducted and interpreted based on the guidance provided by the test vendor.
 - Establish procedures that ensure teachers, families, and students have the appropriate materials and understand how to complete the assessment accurately.
 - See the [School Recommendations section for an example on how to prepare staff for remote testing](#).
 - See a [Sample Remote Administration Guide for Teachers](#).



- See [Sample family letters on testing](#).
- Results from standardized assessments administered with altered or modified procedures should be interpreted with caution and in the context of the procedures used to administer the assessment.

Data-Based Decision Making

- Do not aggregate student outcome data collected during the pandemic with data from previous school years for important system-wide educational decisions at the school, district, or state level.
 - Consider analyzing data within the categories of pre-COVID and during COVID (and eventually post-COVID).
 - It is best to disaggregate data according to the instructional model in which a student has predominantly received instruction (e.g., hybrid, in-person only, distance learning only). Districts may observe differences in student outcomes, student needs, and patterns of missing data based on whether students are in-person, hybrid, or distance learning. As a result, districts, schools, and programs may need to develop action plans that address the different needs of families and students that emerge as a function of the model families have selected for instruction.
- Continue using multiple sources of data to inform instructional planning, assess students' needs, and inform decision-making. If different sources of data are missing at the local level, districts/schools/programs should dive deeper to examine reasons for the missing data and create a plan for targeted data collection.
 - Sources of data may include: Local standardized assessments (e.g., MAP, FASTBridge, interim assessments); Kindergarten Entry Profile (KEP) approved assessments, Teacher-created assessments (e.g., classroom assessments, observations, feedback from teachers and students, work samples); Grades; and Attendance.
- Ensure grade-level (e.g., professional learning communities) and cross-grade level (e.g., pre-kindergarten and kindergarten, vertical transition, departmental) teams have scheduled opportunities to collaborate, plan, and engage in professional development to learn and use assessment data to drive instructional planning.
- Establish routines where collaborative teams (e.g., grade level teams, cross-grade level teams, professional learning communities) conduct regular and timely data review to make instructional decisions for individual and groups of students.
- Make instructional decisions promptly after collecting assessment information.



- Do not use state accountability tests (MN Comprehensive Assessment) to determine instructional placements and programs for individual students. State accountability tests measure a school system's performance level on learning standards and do not provide sufficient information to make instructional decisions for individual students.
- Create a communication and professional learning plan to ensure that educators/practitioners, students (if appropriate), and families understand the purpose of the assessment, how the data are used (and not used), and how to understand/interpret the results.
- Use universal screening data to facilitate identifying students for additional supports (e.g., remediation and accelerated supports). When limited data are available for a large group of students, conduct a class-wide intervention and measure students' performance against the goals of the intervention as a proxy to understand learning gains, gaps, and response to instruction.

Family Collaboration

- Communicate assessment plans and results with families in a timely manner, and engage families as partners. Consider providing family data literacy supports and developing district-level protocols to share assessment results (e.g., sharing rationale for assessments, explaining how the data will be used) through multiple avenues (letters, phone calls, conferences).
 - See [sample family letters](#) on administering assessments.
 - See [sample of family letter on assessment results](#).
- Take into account the resources students and families require to successfully and accurately complete the assessment when administering assessments remotely (e.g., physical and electronic materials, high-speed internet, computer/device).
- Actively partner and engage families in their child(ren)'s learning and school experience. Districts/schools/programs may consider administering family interviews, surveys, sending out newsletters, or making frequent phone calls home to ensure that family voices are represented in their child(ren)'s school experience.
- Take advantage of parent portals or communication boards to increase opportunities of communication between parents and districts/schools/programs. Also take advantage of conferences as opportunities for two-way dialogue with families regarding student learning and assessments.
- Ensure families have full access to information by offering communication in the language of family choice and explaining technical terms in family-friendly language.



Considerations for Early Learning Assessments

Although many practices described above are relevant to educators working with early learners, the next items specifically address early learning (defined as birth - third grade) assessment practices.

- KEP-approved assessments are not meant to determine kindergarten eligibility. [Kindergarten eligibility](#) is based on age, immunization, and [early childhood screening](#).
- MDE encourages the use of authentic (observation-based), formative, standards-based assessments for the primary purpose of informing instruction. This includes [Kindergarten Entry Profile \(KEP\)](#) approved assessments for programs providing 350 hours of instruction per year. See [this MDE document](#) for detailed information about using KEP-approved assessments during the COVID-19 pandemic.
- Many authentic and formative assessments designed to assess early learners can be administered across multiple learning models (in-person or remote, synchronous or asynchronous), as they rely largely on practitioner observations and family/caregiver interviews, photos, videos, work samples, and questionnaires. [This MDE resource](#) provides information about using authentic observation strategies during hybrid or distance learning.
- For information on remote administration of standardized, norm-referenced early learning assessments (those typically used to identify and support students with disabilities), see the [Early Childhood Technical Assistance Center's guidance on norm-referenced assessments that can be administered remotely](#). As noted above, results from standardized assessments administered with altered procedures should be interpreted with caution and in the context of the specific administration procedures.



MN Department of Education Assessment Resources

- [Minnesota K-12 Academic Standards](#)
- [Benchmark Achievement Level Descriptors](#)
- [Minnesota Early Learning Standards](#)
- [Assessment in Early Childhood](#)
- [Reading Proficiency](#)
- [Screening and Identifying Characteristics of Dyslexia](#)
- [Student Instruction COVID-19 Resources](#)
- Professional learning for educators:
 - [Writing Summative Classroom Assessments](#)
 - [Teaching and Learning Led by Evidence Webinar Series](#)

Educational Leader Resources

- [Using student achievement data to support instructional decision making \(NCEE 2009-4067\)](#)
- [Assessment Tips for Administrators: Crafting Your Data Collection Plan for the 2020-2021 School Year](#)
- [Assessment Tips for Teachers: Strategies for Partnering With Families to Collect Data](#)
- [Promising Practices to Accelerate Learning for Students With Disabilities During COVID-19 and Beyond](#)
- [Formative Assessment for Remote Teaching: Evidence and Feedback](#)
- [Learning as We Go: Principles for Effective Assessment During the COVID-19 Pandemic](#)

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